

Tips for choosing a digital mental health service

Digital mental health services may offer information, counselling, treatment (including assessment and referral), or peer support. Delivery may be on the computer, via SMS (text), apps, or by telephone or videoconferencing. Digital services can make access easier, and some can be used anonymously, reducing concerns about the stigma associated with seeking help. However, it can be a challenge to decide whether to recommend a digital service to a consumer or carer.

This guide provides some tips to assist you to choose wisely. It includes some key questions you might want answered before you decide to recommend a digital service.

1. What does this service offer and who is it designed for?

You need to know whether the digital service can meet the needs of the intended user.

- What health conditions does the service help with (e.g. depression, anxiety)?
- Who are the target clients for the service (e.g. adolescents, older persons)?
- What kind of assistance does it provide (e.g. information, counselling, CBT)?
- How is the service delivered (e.g. telephone, app)?
- Are health professionals involved in delivering the service?
- When is the service available?
- How much does the service cost?
- Is there any ongoing cost?
- What is required to access the service (e.g. devices or equipment required, internet access, data requirements)?
- Can the service be accessed anonymously?
- Does the service allow a carer or family member to work together with the consumer to use the service?

2. What claims does the service make about its benefits?

You want to recommend a service that works. There are many digital mental health services that are informed by up to date knowledge and deliver what they claim to do.

- Is there any scientific evidence to show benefit from using the service?
- Has the service been endorsed by a government or professional body?
- When was the service last reviewed and updated?

3. What is the likelihood of harm for someone using the service?

Some services could be harmful if they provide incorrect advice or do not work as they claim to do.

- Are there any precautions or safety warnings related to the service?
- Has anyone reported concerns or experienced adverse events after using the service?

4. Who is offering the service? Should you trust them?

You may perceive services provided by government agencies, not-for-profit organisations, universities or health services as more trustworthy, but there are some other key details that might help you to decide.

- Who is offering the service?
- What is their business model (e.g. government, university, not-for-profit, private company)?
- What was the funding source for development of the digital service (e.g. government grant, third-party investor)?
- How does the service make money (e.g. through downloads, licence fees, sale of data, advertising)?
- If the service is free, is there any conflict of interest (e.g. will the company inappropriately benefit from someone using the service or might they provide the user with information biased towards their products)?

5. Is the service easy to use and will the user be likely to keep using it?

A good indication that a service will be user-friendly is if consumers and carers played a key role in its planning and design. Reading online reviews may also give insights on how others have found the service. If a service is difficult to use or not engaging, those using it may not persist with it long enough to get the intended benefit.

- Is there any independent research on how easy the service is to use?
- How much time will the user need to be set aside to use the service?
- How long will it take to get results from using the service?
- Were consumers and carers involved in the development of the service?
- What do others who have used the service say about it?

6. Who will have access to the user's data?

Most digital services will record some information about users, but a key question is what they do with it. You should be comfortable with any risk that using the service may pose to the privacy of the user.

- What information does the service collect?
- Who owns that data?
- Who is that information shared with and why?
- Where is information about the user stored?
- Can the user easily share their results if they want to (e.g. with you as their healthcare professional or with their support people)?
- Can the user save the personal information they enter on their device without it being shared with the provider?
- Does the service have a privacy (data-sharing) policy?
- What security measures are in place to protect the user's personal information?

7. Is it clear who to contact if you have any questions or concerns about the service?

Services should provide contact information – a website or an email address or telephone number – to get answers to some of these questions or to provide feedback.

Conclusion

There is no simple rule for selecting a digital mental health service and potential users may have different priorities such as:

- A service that offers minimal risk in terms of privacy and data security
- Knowing the service is likely to be of benefit
- An easy to use service.

Regardless of user preference, these tips will help you to be more informed and may help you to decide which digital mental health services to recommend.

Questions?

You can find more information on National Safety and Quality Digital Mental Health Standards at: www.safetyandquality.gov.au/dmhs

You can access a range of free and low-cost services on the Australian Government's digital mental health gateway: headtohealth.gov.au